U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
News Release

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U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Hurricane Relief Support and Levee Repair
Background Information

The breaches that have occurred on the levees surrounding New Orleans are located on the 17th Street Canal Levee and London Avenue Canal Levee. The 17th Street Canal Levees and London Avenue Canal Levees are completed segments of the Lake Ponchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection Project. Although other portions of the Lake Ponchartrain project are pending, these two segments were complete, and no modifications or improvements to these segments were pending, proposed, or remain unfunded.

Three major pending projects are in various stages of development: two hurricane protection projects -- the West Bank and Vicinity project and the remaining portions of the Lake Ponchartrain project, and the Southeast Louisiana flood damage reduction project.
Even if these three projects in development were completed and in place, they would not have prevented the breach and the flooding caused by the breach. Like the levee that was breached, the hurricane protection projects were designed to withstand forces of a hurricane that has a .5% chance of occurrence in any given year. This translates to what is now classified as a Category 3 hurricane.

Funding
The Administration's Fiscal Year 2006 budget request for the four main New Orleans flood control projects [West Bank, Southeast Louisiana, Lake Ponchartrain, and New Orleans-Venice] was $41.5 million.

The perception of cuts to the Corps budget may come from a misunderstanding of construction project funding practices or from comparing the Administration's budget request to the Corps' project capability figures for these four main projects, which for FY2006 totaled $142.7 million.

Annual project funding is based on a variety of factors, including an analysis of the work that can be completed in an upcoming year and the work that already has been completed in a previous year. Funding levels may vary as a project progresses toward completion. Assumptions that these year-to-year changes reflect a change in a projects' prioritization or are intended to change the rate of its progress fail to take into account the broader factors necessary to manage resources in an organization that is simultaneously completing multiple construction projects.

Additionally, project capability figures are not budget requests and do not represent a request by the Corps for funding. Instead, project capability figures represent the maximum amount of work on a project that the Corps estimates could be accomplished in a given year, assuming an unlimited supply of resources--financial, manpower, equipment, and construction materials.

Project capability amounts are rarely funded. If full capability funding were provided for every project in a given year, it would be very difficult to complete all the work because it would likely not be possible to secure sufficient Corps or contractor personnel to construct all projects at the same time. The same holds true for specific regions of the country. If full capability funding were provided for every project in the same region or locality, completing all the work would be very difficult given the significant strain this would place on existing contracting, staffing, equipment and material resources.

[Quotes below are from Lt. Gen. Carl Strock, Commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Chief of Engineers, and are excerpted from his remarks during a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Special Briefing for the media via conference call on Thursday, September 1, 2005 at 1 p.m. EDT. A full transcript is available from the Public Affairs Office at (202) 761-0011.]

There have been suggestions that inadequate funding for levee projects delayed their completion and resulted in the flooding of New Orleans.

GEN. STROCK: "In fact, the levee failures we saw were in areas of the projects that were at their full project design... So that part of the project was in place, and had this project been fully complete ... [West Bank, Southeast Louisiana, and Lake Ponchartrain] it's my opinion, based on the intensity of this storm, that the flooding of the Central Business District and the French Quarter would still have occurred. So I do not see that the level of funding is really a contributing factor in this case."

There have also been suggestions that the Corps of Engineers was unable to fully fund flood control needs in New Orleans or elsewhere because funding was diverted to the Global War on Terror.

GEN. STROCK: "Let me also address the issue of the general impact of the war in Iraq on civil works funding. We've seen some suggestions that our budget has been affected by the war. I can also say that I do not see that to be the case. If you look at the historical levels of funding for the Corps of Engineers from the pre-war levels back to 1992, '91, before we actually got into this, you'll see that the level of funding has been fairly stable throughout that period. So I think we would see that our funding levels would have dropped off if that were the case; so I do not see that as an issue that is relevant to the discussion of the flood protection of the City of New Orleans."

Finally, some believe that New Orleans flooded because there were inadequate coastal wetlands in Southern Louisiana to absorb the storm surge.

GEN. STROCK: "Again, my assessment in this case is that any loss of wetlands in the barrier islands associated with those processes did not have a significant impact on this event. I say this because the storm track took it east of the City of New Orleans, and most of those barrier islands and marshlands are located to the south and west of the city; so the storm did not track through that direction anyway, and I don't think that that was a contributing factor in the situation."